

**DOCTOR
WHO**

SCOUT'S SUPERPOSITION

Seth Lukas Hynes



The Doctor entered the opulent golden hallway and joined the queue.

He stood at the back of a long line of finely-dressed Gallifreyans, who were slowly filing toward the pair of enormous doors leading in and out of the throne-room. As each member of the queue entered the throne-room, another Gallifreyan exited through the other door, looking elated, stunned or mildly disturbed.

The waiting Gallifreyans displayed a similar myriad of reactions to the Doctor's presence; some nodded tacitly in greeting, others stared at him in undisguised awe, others glared over their shoulders, and some whispered intently among themselves.

It was scandalous: the Doctor had deposed the great Rassilon himself, and was now standing in line to meet his successor.

Gallifrey had been operating largely under the radar, cowering at the end of time since its return from the pocket dimension. But now it was back in the news again, with gossip all over Mutter's Spiral about a new Lord President, one who had claimed power through a mad, ingenious coup.

The Doctor was keen to meet this new Lord President – and figured he was obligated to pay his respects, after all the disruption he'd caused.

His mobile phone suddenly began chirping from his breast pocket.

The Doctor hastily procured his mobile phone to silence the jingle, and checked the screen. The alert simply read 'Scout'.

He slapped his forehead. *Scout!*

It was time to pick up Scout from her vacation! He'd almost forgotten!

It had been a full month apart for the both of them. The Doctor could have immediately traveled forward a month after dropping her off, but he preferred to keep these times apart on a real-time basis for the sake of an equal footing.

The Doctor turned to address the man behind him.

“He’s all yours,” the Doctor said with a wink, before bounding out of the hallway and back to his TARDIS.

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Written by Seth Lukas Hynes
with editorial assistance from Sean Mills

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novella inspired by the BBC program Doctor Who.

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‘Where misunderstanding dwells, misuse will not be far behind. No theory in the history of science has been more misused and abused by cranks and charlatans... than quantum mechanics.

- Sean Carroll, cosmologist

I

Scarlett 'Scout' Robinson was an anachronistic sight to behold, in her long brown dress, lacy-collared blouse and feathered bonnet, as she greeted her new flat-mates.

The first fellow in a gaudy gaggle stepped forward. "Nice threads, man," Jonah, a lean, bearded young man wearing high-waisted jeans and a swirly shirt, appraised stiffly.

Man. It was only her first hour in this new time, and already the lingo was confusing.

Scout smiled, a little awkwardly. "Thanks," she replied. "I'm Scarlett. What's your name?"

"Jonah," the gangly man muttered, proffering a hand as he cast his disinterested gaze elsewhere.

As Scout shook lanky Jonah's hand, she felt a pang of sadness at the sound of rhythmic, grinding engines fading away outside.

At her request, the Doctor had sent Scout on a holiday of sorts, so that she could experience a strikingly new culture. The Doctor remained tight-lipped about exactly when or where he was taking her, but he assured her that their destination would be almost as far removed from her Victorian origins as could be.

And the Doctor was right.

Scout felt like she'd stepped onto an alien planet.

She'd visited plenty of alien worlds, but here and now, this mundane, modest living room setting threw the strangeness of everything else into sharp relief.

Unlike the light pastel simplicity of lower-class abodes in her time, this room was suffused with colour. The walls were bright orange; a spotty rainbow rug covered much of the scuffed hardwood floor, pinned down by a thoroughly-scratched glass coffee table; the chairs were formless red blobs, and posters with

band logos and giant leaves adorned the walls. A wooden box with a convex glass face sat in one corner, another box with a rotating circular platform and a long, clawed arm lay in another corner, and a vase containing undulating red blobs churned atop the first box.

Hand shaken, Jonah retreated.

The rest of the flat-mates were far more welcoming.

The second person to introduce herself was short and petite, her face speckled with freckles that shifted into new constellations with her toothy smile. Scout's eyes nearly boggled at both her voluminous blonde hair, which was framed by a flowery headband, and how far above the knee her yellow dress ended.

"Hello! It's so great to have you here!" the perky little lady exclaimed brightly, opening her arms for a hug, which Scout accepted after a moment's hesitation. "I'm Debbie, by the way!"

Next up was a tall woman in comparatively austere dress, with long red hair and strong cheekbones. She wore a light red sweater and cream-colored trousers, but still the ankles of her trouser legs flared out absurdly far.

"Hi. I'm Birdie," she said, her voice velvety deep. She had the tell-tale aura of a smoker, but her teeth had no trace of yellow. "Welcome to Casa del Healy."

"She's the Healy," Debbie stated cheerily.

"Thanks." Scout raised an eyebrow as they shook hands. "Birdie?" she queried in amusement.

"Yeah, Birdie," Birdie confirmed, grinning back. "We all got nicknames. What do we call you?"

"People usually call me Scout," she answered, blushing.

"Scout." Birdie tasted the word and nodded. "I like it."

The last flat-mate was a dark-skinned man with puffy black hair and wearing a button-up polo shirt and chequered slacks. The top

two buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing part of his densely-haired chest.

“Hey Scout, good to meet you. I’m Izzy,” he said exuberantly, his handshake firm and his accent carrying an American hardness to its vowels. “How long are you staying with us?”

“I’m not sure. A month, I think,” Scout answered.

“That’s awesome! High-five!” Izzy raised his hand.

Scout ducked with a startled yelp.

Izzy’s eyes widened in shocked surprise and he lowered his hand, but said nothing. His whole body seemed to sag.

“Oh, baby, he’s not trying to hurt you,” Debbie said with almost motherly concern, running up to give Scout another comforting hug.

Jonah coughed, a dull, unconcerned confusion in his grey eyes.

Izzy looked up from his feet. “You okay, lady?” he asked Scout, late but genuine. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“You never had a high-five before?” Birdie wondered aloud, perplexed but considerate.

Red-faced with embarrassment, Scout gently disengaged from Debbie’s hug and addressed this bunch of kind, peculiar, alien people – except for Jonah, who slouched, detached, some distance way.

“Listen, it’s great meeting you all, and I’m really looking forward to staying with you,” she began with earnest gratitude, “but I’m... I’m not from around here, so you’ll have to talk to me like I just fell out of the sky.”

Jonah and Debbie laughed. Birdie placed a supportive hand on Scout’s shoulder.

“Well, I don’t think that will be any trouble,” she said with a wink.

II

After her first night in Casa del Healy, her flat-mates were determined to show Scout as much culture as possible.

First thing's first: she needed some new threads.

Debbie and Izzy took her bright and early down to a thrift-store to pick out some clothes.

Scout had money – the Doctor had given her approximately £800, which he'd fished from various nooks and crannies in the TARDIS – but her new flat-mates insisted on paying.

Their generosity was lovely – and just as well, Scout realized, as she discreetly checked her wallet during the cab-ride. The notes and coins she was given had widely disparate dates spanning a couple of centuries – no, millennia. Many of them depicted long-unborn monarchs.

Upon arriving at the thrift-store, Scout was stunned at the variety of clothes on offer.

The store was a kaleidoscope of patterns, from dots, stripes and spirals to paisley and interlocking geometric shapes. There were light dresses, cheeky short skirts, tank-tops, flared pants, jeans – Scout was fascinated by the texture; it was like a dyed, pliable leather that could breathe – tiny shorts, form-fitting body-suits, elegant jackets and suit-and-tie combos.

The emphasis was on comfort and individual expression, almost to the point of immodesty. The social conventions had changed dramatically: show as much skin as you like, and trousers and ties are in for women.

Scout was amazed at the efficiency of these garments. The attire she was accustomed to from her own time had multiple bothersome, stifling layers. In terms of area, she estimated that

much of 1970s fashion was a fifth that of Victorian attire, but many magnitudes greater in appealing showiness.

Scout cast an incredulous look at her new friends as she showed them a small, compact top that was barely more than a bra.

Debbie and Izzy gave her thumbs-up.

Scout smiled; the meaning of that gesture was self-evident.

After she finished her selection, Scout felt a pang of remorse as Izzy paid the store-clerk. Her new friends were being so generous, and everything was so expensive now.

The fine silk gowns and extravagantly ornamental dresses she would gawk at through store windows in the upper-class districts 'only' cost a few pounds at most.

That indulgence was several weeks' wages for most people in the Victorian era, and yet here was Izzy casually handing over £18.

Scout inwardly balked at the ballooning of both costs and income, though she suspected that the former was still tilted against the latter.

The trio finally left the thrift-store with Scout feeling severely self-conscious, yet unaccountably relaxed in that very tank-top, a long blue coat, slightly-worn grey slacks, a breezy pair of open-toed sandals and a woollen cap which Debbie squealed in delight at the sight of.

Scout's toes wiggled without walls, her left knee peeked out from a tiny hole in her slacks and her tummy was exposed in a way that would have been inconceivable back in her day, but which, she had to admit, was very flattering to it.

Before leaving, Scout had checked and rechecked herself incessantly, twisting and turning in the mirror.

"Don't worry, Scout. You look groovy!" Izzy assured her.

Scout stopped her anxious pivoting. "You really think so?"

“Yeah! You look fantastic!” Debbie declared, jumping up and down and clapping her hands.

Scout slowly broke into a wide, radiant smile that mirrored his friends' enthusiasm.

As the trio walked to the next stop in their adventure, making their way through busy streets teeming with people in similar garb and spirits, Scout marvelled at her surroundings, at the intriguing feeling of *deja vu* they generated.

Alien worlds and the far future were almost unrecognizable in their advanced splendour. But here – like the Healy living room, the familiar aspects of this new London made everything else feel all the stranger.

She gazed up at mighty towers of glass and steel. These monolithic, palatial structures were not for nobility, as she first assumed, but rather for the more affluent businesses and high-roller apartments.

London was in a state of transition: earthen buildings of rock, brick and stone, of Edwardian and Victorian vintage, clustered at the feet of spires and skyscrapers. Delicate tubes of neon lighting lay dormant, waiting for night-time.

She was astounded and relieved at the sight of Buckingham Palace, and the architectural conjoined twins of Big Ben and the Parliament. She almost expected them to be gone – the Doctor once having alluded to plenty of monarchies meeting their end in the twentieth century – but these majestic monuments of the old world lorded over the city in regal permanence.

Automobiles streaked and roared through the roadways. They had a rounded boxiness to them, many had hinged retractable roofs, and they moved with such incredible speed.

Scout flinched as a particularly noisy car rumbled up beside them at an intersection.

These cars were a major evolution, she reflected, from the spindly, slow-moving, rattling insectoid cars of her time.

But cars today were still like insects in one way: she would rarely even see a car in the Victorian era, but now they swarmed in tight, narrow formations like ants.

As Debbie and Izzy guided Scout to their destination, they intermittently stopped at zigzagged sections of road, where the cars paused to let pedestrians cross.

Scout breathed fast and deep as they journeyed through the city, out of excitement – 'Where are we going?' she wondered eagerly – and mild exertion in the temperate weather.

She tasted the air, and it somehow seemed cleaner and not cleaner; free of the soot and effluent odours of her time, but laced with a heavier tang of petrochemicals that caught in the lungs just as much.

The trio finally arrived at an antiquated two-storey building near the Thames.

With its tall, broad, triangular roof and glass double-doors, Scout initially thought it was a church. But the doors displayed bombastic posters depicting gun-toting heroes and busty maidens, and a large white sign above, framed with dozens of flashing orange and yellow light-bulbs, read 'Godfather' in big black letters.

"What's 'Godfather'?" Scout asked her friends.

Debbie's eyebrows rose. "You've never heard of *The Godfather*?" she said, amazed.

"They're saying it's the best American movie of all time," Izzie stated proudly.

Scout's eyebrows rose. "Really?" she cried.

Now she couldn't wait.

The trio entered the foyer, which was a smooth, spacious affair with red carpeting, and queued at the ticket stand. The air had a crisp, creamy taste, with the smell coming from a corner-stand laden with treats. Scout's mouth watered at the sight.

A door opened on the second floor and Birdie emerged, a puff of smoke in her wake.

Scout felt strangely drawn to her as she descended the stairs, her movements lean, graceful and casually confident.

Birdie wordlessly greeted each of her flat-mates in their own way: a handshake for Debbie and a high-five for Izzy.

"Hi Birdie. Do you work here?" Scout asked her politely.

"I'm the projectionist," Birdie answered, then after a moment's pause, opened her arms. "May I?"

Scout was surprised. Birdie was plenty kind and caring, but appeared more like the composed, inner-feelings type. "Sure," she said, accepting the hug.

Birdie smelled strongly of cigarette smoke, but Scout didn't mind; to the contrary, it gave her a spicy, almost musky allure. She felt Birdie's strong, wiry arms wrapped around her shoulders, and felt slightly tingly.

Birdie gently released Scout, a slight, knowing smile on her lips, then turned to the ticket-seller. "Let 'em through, Bax. They're with me."

The pimply ticket-seller nodded with a scowl.

Birdie turned back to Scout and lightly touched her shoulder. "It's starting soon. I hope you like it."

Scout nodded, smiling. She was practically vibrating with excitement.

As Birdie ascended the stairs back to her smoky lair, Debbie whooped and Izzy shot Scout a wink.

The trio then lined up at the confectionery stand, with Scout at the lead.

The stall had many varieties of brightly-coloured candy, contained in little boxes and bundles of foil, and the centrepiece was a deep tub of white knobbly pellets that the attendant shovelled servings out of and poured into cardboard boxes for patrons. An ankle-level refrigerator contained drinks and ice-creams.

After a while, it was Scout's turn to order. This time she was paying; she made that clear, anachronistic currency be damned.

"My favourites are the Reese's cups," Debbie opined helpfully.

"What's that stuff?" Scout said, pointing at the tub.

This question floored her new friends.

"You've never heard of popcorn?" Debbie squeaked in amazement.

"It's good, but get a drink – the corn'll dry you up something fierce," Izzy advised.

The black attendant fidgeted as he waited for Scout to order.

"It all looks really good," Scout said, glancing apologetically up at the attendant before surveying her options again, "but won't candy spoil lunch?"

Debbie and Izzy had a hearty laugh at that.

"Nah, girl. You treat yourself when you go to the movies. It's what you do. Live a little," Izzy urged her.

And with that, Scout clumsily carted a small popcorn, a chocolate-coated vanilla ice-cream and a Coke to her seat.

As the projector clattered to life, Scout twisted her neck to steal a glance into the projection room.

Was that a wave in the darkness?

"Leave the gun. Take the cannoli."

Scout sat rapt for the entire three hours. The plot may have been slightly overcomplicated, and Michael Corleone's transformation into a ruthless crime lord was quite disturbing, but the novelty of the experience alone was fantastic.

For Scout had never seen a movie before.

She'd heard people talking about them, and based on what they'd described, movies sounded like the most magical thing in the world to her, but this here paled in comparison to those contemporary accounts.

Moving pictures with sound and colour. She felt like she was really in Vito's office, eavesdropping on the fates of criminals. Dense orchestral scores with no performers present; her heart shook in her chest with the crescendos.

This wasn't a stage play-like pantomime with rockets lodged in Lunar faces; this was real.

This really was the future.

Scout excited the theatre raving about every minute of the film, but also rather bloated and tired from all the sugar she'd ingested.

Thankfully, Izzy knew just the place to 'work off' their recent binge.

"Automatic man: moves like a computer!"

The disco gave Scout her biggest sensory bombardment thus far.

The walls were fun-house mirrored, and everything else, from the grid dance floor to the ceiling to the well-stocked bar, flashed dizzily with every colour.

This could almost be the TARDIS console, Scout noticed with a smile.

Dozens of people grooved to the beat, and the music – oh, the music boggled Scout's mind. It was powerful, robust and energetic yet smooth, and filled with exotic notes.

A DJ to the side – Scout squinted at the bearded figure and realized it was Jonah – busied himself with knobs and levers on a terminal of sorts, a record spinning on the counter. His movements were fast and jerky, and he had a frantic, unblinking, almost pained expression on his face.

Debbie, Izzy and Scout eased their way through the cavorting crowd to the bar, where Izzy ordered a beer and Debbie ordered a rum and coke.

“What would you like?” Izzy asked her.

“Um... a brandy?” Scout answered quietly, expecting a rebuke.

“Ooh, fancy!” Debbie trilled approvingly, then turned to the bartender. “A brandy for Scout, please!”

Izzy and Debbie downed their drinks, gave the harried-looking Jonah a high-five and entered the dance floor.

Scout figured they must come here all the time, but they both had giddy childlike grins as they began swaying, gyrating and frolicking to the music.

The ice clinked inaudibly in Scout's glass as she idled at the bar, watching her friends with astonished admiration.

They looked ridiculous, but also really cool.

Cool; that was a term she had instantly warmed to.

“Automatic man: hero from the psychic future!”

Debbie and Izzy paused in their dancing to beckon Scout onto the dance floor.

Scout shook her head, blushing.

Debbie and Izzy beckoned again, shouting muffled words of encouragement.

Scout smiled, downed her brandy, took a couple of deep breaths and entered the funky fray. Izzy, Debbie and a couple of other dancers cheered as she joined them.

Initially, Scout danced slowly and carefully, face reddening as she tried to imitate other dancers' movements: rolling fists, robotic twitches, theatrical pointing to the roof.

Suddenly warmed and emboldened by the brandy taking hold, and compelled by the beat like never before, Scout just let it rip, waving her arms, wiggling her hips, stamping her feet and spinning around like a force of nature.

Other dancers took notice of her sudden enthusiasm and cheered her on, Debbie and Izzy whooping and jumping beside her.

Scout grinned from ear to ear as she danced, wild and uninhibited and full of life.

This was ridiculous, a conservative recess of her brain complained, but she didn't care. This was wonderful.

Scout was having the time of her life, and her stay had only just begun.

III

Scout had now been staying in the '70s for just under a week.

It was Thursday, and that was girls' night in at Casa del Healy.

Debbie, Birdie and Scout had dragged the bean-bag chairs to the middle of the room, and now lounged upon them for a spirited discussion, aided by some 'refreshments'. The black-and-white television ran on mute nearby, casting a faint silvery light into the room.

Debbie and Birdie each smoked a joint, but Scout stuck with wine. Scout had never smoked, and marijuana – despite being another (privately-enjoyed) staple of the current times – was something she had no interest in trying. She was feeling a bit addled from the pungent second-hand smoke alone.

Birdie was leading the discussion. She was slightly looser, more animated than usual, the tip of her joint tracing bright-orange in the near-darkness as she gesticulated. Her eyes looked a little sunken, dashes of red in the whites, but she remained lucid and confident.

"This is the essence of Women's Lib," Birdie declared. "We are women presenting ourselves as independent, equal people with full agency to live our lives the way we choose, not automatically beholden to male needs, desires and standards," she explained proudly.

Debbie and Scout nodded emphatically, the latter entranced.

When her head finally stopped bobbing, Scout looked down into her glass, ruminating. "Things have come a long way, haven't they?" she said, impressed.

"Yes, but there's still a long way to go," Birdie responded, firmly but kindly. Her long, aristocratic fingers counted off the current deficiencies in women's rights.

"Abortions and birth control are legal here, but heavily stigmatized. Fuck, abortion is still illegal in some US states!" She took a drag from her cigarette, then continued. "Women are discouraged from entering boys-club academia or male-dominated fields. Rape and harassment are rife." She switched to her other hand. "Women are still objectified in the media. A woman can't be sexually active without being called a slut. If a woman isn't sweet, demure and deferential, she's called uppity, a bitch or a dyke." She pronounced that last label with particular bitterness.

"What we're saying is that culture and society are still geared way more toward male respect and success than female, and Women's Lib wants to break that system down," Debbie clarified to Scout, her natural – now drug-laced – cheer tempered with conviction.

Scout nodded heartily again. "I know, I know, I get it," Scout assured them. "It's just that where I'm from, women were fighting – getting beaten up in the streets – just for the vote."

Debbie brought her hand to her mouth with a gasp.

"Where are you from?" Birdie asked Scout quizzically, her tone level, though her slightly tensed frame betrayed the shock beneath.

"London," Scout answered, then scrunched her eyes shut in embarrassment.

There was a long silence.

"Have you been asleep since the 1910s?" Birdie queried dubiously.

Scout shook her head. "I'm..." She took a bolstering sip of wine. "I'm a time traveller."

"Oh." Comprehension dawned, and Birdie's face lit up. "Oh! That's who that was!"

"Who?"

“The guy who arranged your stay here!” Birdie recalled with growing excitement. “That was the Doctor!”

On the sidelines, Debbie was looking very confused. “Come on, Birdie, the Doctor isn't real,” she said.

“I mean – a weirdly-dressed guy comes out of the blue and has us let his young friend shack up with us!” Birdie persisted. “The Doctor is a time-traveling adventurer with lots of companions. And here you're saying you're from the turn of the century. It fits! All of it!” Birdie stared at Scout, a wide grin frozen on her features, waiting to be proven right.

Scout returned the grin. “Yeah, I'm the Doctor's companion,” she confirmed.

“Yes!” Birdie punched the air in triumph, then instantly became more subdued and candid. “Just make sure he treats you right and doesn't give you any shit,” she advised Scout pointedly, leaning forward.

“Oh, don't worry. The Doctor's my best friend in the universe,” Scout told them openly.

Debbie laughed. “Well, I hope we're good friends too,” she said brightly.

She extended her right hand, holding up her nearly-spent joint.

After a moment of confusion, Birdie held her own joint forward and Scout joined in with her wine glass, and they tapped their refreshments together for an unconventional toast.

VI

Scout lay in bed, dressed in blue-dotted pyjamas, reading with her head under the covers and a little torch in her hand.

Before retiring to bed, Debbie had given Scout a dog-eared book, handing it to her with a crafty wink. Scout was mildly intrigued at first, but now she couldn't put it down, and she devoured it long into the night.

The book was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by Harper Lee and published in 1960.

Scout calculated with slight surprise that she would be 72 in 1960. Gosh. Hell, she'd be 84 this year.

To Kill a Mockingbird was a superbly written, beautifully poignant but very depressing novel about justice and racism in small-town America.

Somewhat like the clothing, the prose of this more modern era came across as more efficient, more streamlined than the prose of her time. The English vocabulary was growing exponentially, of course, but sentences and paragraphs were shorter and much less verbose.

But this did not equate to simpler. It was a matter of style changing across the decades, and Lee was a master of elegant description and pathos.

And what's more, the protagonist was named Scout!

Despite the disgusting discrimination and segregation the novel unflinchingly depicted, which deeply pained her to read, the real Scout couldn't suppress a smirk whenever the novel's protagonist was addressed by name.

Scout, Jem and Dill had just taken their seats in the coloured balcony of the courthouse when the real Scout heard faint rattling from elsewhere in the house.

The real Scout wasn't worried. It was probably a peckish Izzy getting a midnight cookie or beer from the kitchen.

As both Scouts waited in grim anticipation for the defendant Tom's trial to commence, the real Scout heard more noises: a low scraping of wood on wood, regular ascending footsteps and something sliding to the side.

Now Scout felt uneasy. Why would anyone enter the attic at this hour?

Scout quietly opened her door, rounded the hallway and tiptoed into the main hallway, where she found a ladder reaching into the attic.

Unsettled, muscles tensed, Scout slowly scaled the ladder.

The cluttered attic smelled of dust and antiquity, stuffed with trinkets, keepsakes and detritus from generations before. Faint moonlight seeped in through a round, lead-light window with a four-point star inlay, and there was a man, his back to Scout, sitting cross-legged before the window.

Scout squinted into the gloom, not daring to shine her torch on the unidentified figure, and as her eyes adjusted, identified the man to be Jonah, with his angular, bony frame and messy hair.

She relaxed a little, although Jonah's stiff, motionless presence still unnerved her.

Jonah was staring blankly at a large painting propped up against the window.

'Painting' was a generous description. The canvas was totally black and featureless, but it had a nice coiling gold frame.

After several minutes, during which Jonah never moved a muscle, Scout finally coughed to break the silence.

Jonah's entire body jolted, and he turned around with surprising swiftness. His expression was coldly flustered.

"What are you doing up?" he said irately.

"What are you doing?" Scout demanded back.

"None of your business!" Jonah shouted.

Deeply disturbed, Scout quickly descended the ladder, leaving Jonah alone with his blank painting.

Scout's heart was pounding. She was rather shaken, and suddenly very fatigued, after Jonah's outburst, and now a racially-charged courtroom didn't seem like a satisfying refuge.

She slowly walked down the hallway and rounded the corner, only to find Birdie slouched against a wall outside her room.

She was dressed in a light black nightgown, and looked slightly anxious, almost expectant.

"Hi Birdie," Scout said, her mind and muscles slowly uncoiling.

"Hi Scout," Birdie sang, smiling widely. "I can't sleep. Can I... sleep with you?"

Scout marvelled at Birdie's strength and effortless poise, but right now she was so vulnerable. There was a gently pleading look in her mauve eyes.

Scout smiled. "Sure," she answered.

They crawled into bed, Birdie snuggling close beside her. Scout felt her warm, slender body pressed against her, smelled lavender in her hair.

Birdie fell asleep within moments.

The outburst in the attic all but forgotten, Scout just listened to Birdie's soft breathing, in a state of blissful calm.

V

Later that morning, nearly the whole clan had gathered around the oval kitchen table for breakfast.

Scout and Birdie sat next to each other, casting each other sidelong smiles.

"So, did everyone sleep well?" Izzy asked the room, spreading marmalade on his toast.

"Yep!" the ever-sunny Debbie answered, spooning a helpful of eggs onto her plate and taking a grapefruit from the fruit-bowl. As she halved it, she addressed Scout. "So, do you like *To Kill A Mockingbird*?" she asked her eagerly.

"Yeah! It's amazing!" Scout said, then held up a warding hand. "I'm at the final court-scene, so don't give anything away," she requested.

Debbie held up a bent little finger, grinning back. "I solemnly pinky-swear not to spoil anything."

Izzy nodded approvingly. "Scout, when you finish the book, we gotta find somewhere that's showing the film," he suggested.

"Cool!" Scout said enthusiastically.

But talk of the book conjured memories of the night before, and Scout's mood deteriorated. She noticed the one empty chair.

Now on edge again, she leaned forward.

"Is Jonah acting weird with you guys?" she queried carefully.

Izzy shook his head. "That's just Jonah," he said, unconcerned through a mouthful of toast. "He mostly keeps to himself when he's not working, but he's a good guy. Don't worry about him."

"But I saw him in the attic, and he yelled at me." Scout turned to face Birdie. "You didn't hear that?"

Birdie shook her head innocently.

Scout eased back into her chair, which creaked her disquiet. "It was weird. He was looking at this black painting. He seemed obsessed."

"Painting?" Birdie uttered.

Just then, Jonah abruptly entered the room, looking sullen and sleep-deprived.

He staggered to the table and grabbed a plate. Scout stared at him with bared suspicion.

"Hey buddy!" Debbie greeted him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Jonah mumbled, grabbing a banana and pouring himself a cup of coffee. He was oblivious to the room's mildly disturbed astonishment as he filled his cup beyond the brim, coffee sloshing over the sides and trickling onto the floor.

"Jonah! The carpet!" Debbie admonished.

"Scout tells us you were in the attic last night," Izzy said, frowning. "What were you doing up there?"

Jonah glared at Izzy.

"Nothing," he finally grunted, then departed with his breakfast, leaving a dripping trail in his wake.

He stopped. Turning around, Jonah stuffed the banana into his pocket, spilling yet more coffee, and extracted a device from his other pocket, pointing it at Scout.

The device was a palm-sized box trailing wires, and it made a ding after scanning Scout.

Blankly satisfied, Jonah lumbered away.

No-one spoke for a long time. The four friends stared at the table face or into the distance, deeply perturbed.

"Well, that was weird," Debbie chimed, looking uncharacteristically downcast.

A change had come over Birdie. She squinted with concentration, her finger reflexively tapping the table-top. The others watched her, intrigued.

"Painting!" she blurted at last, snapping her fingers. "I remember now."

"Remember what?" Scout asked her.

"A couple of years ago, when it was just me and Debbie, some lady visited us and arranged to store a boring old painting in our attic," Birdie recalled intently. "Strangely, she paid us to store the painting, but she never came back." She smiled faintly. "Dear, I'd totally forgotten about it until now. You remember, right, Debbie?"

Debbie shook her head, visibly lost.

"And Jonah was obsessed with it? Why?" Izzy wondered aloud. "And what was that thing he had?"

"What did this lady look like?" Scout asked Birdie.

"Let's see – she was tanned, had big curly brown hair, and dressed very flashy," Birdie answered. "She was quite terse – no-nonsense."

This description triggered in Scout a faint sense of recollection, but it quickly faded and she was left stumped.

Her breakfast was cold, her cereal terminally soggy, and she wasn't hungry anymore.

She stood up from her seat. "I'm going to check out the painting," she decided.

"I'll come with you," Birdie told her kindly.

"Okay," Scout responded, smiling.

They left the room together, and as they walked to the storage cupboard to fetch the ladder, Birdie tentatively took Scout's hand.

They stood still. Scout smiled, pleasantly embarrassed. She squeezed Birdie's hand back.

"I like you, Scout," Birdie said softly.

"I like you too," Scout returned warmly.

They looked into each other's eyes. Like last night, Birdie seemed uncommonly exposed, strangely unsure of herself.

"Are you enjoying the seventies?" Birdie asked her, smiling.

"Yeah!" Scout answered enthusiastically. "It's so cool here!"

"I hope I haven't been too intense," Birdie said sheepishly.

"No, no. It's nice. You're nice," Scout assured her, enjoyably flustered.

"I was afraid that, you know..."

"What?"

"I was afraid that since you're from the Victorian era, I might have been offending you," Birdie said apologetically.

"No, not at all," Scout replied tenderly.

At that, Birdie's expression lit up with relief and gratitude and admiration and longing.

After a tiny moment's hesitation, Scout closed the distance and they hugged tight. Scout felt that swell of peace again, her uncertainty dissipating.

But they had a task to complete. They ended the long hug, then resumed their investigation. They took the ladder from the storage cupboard and climbed up into the attic.

Even in the early morning, the attic was gloomy. The painting remained as inscrutably black as ever, and almost seemed to leech light from the rest of the room.

Birdie groaned, bringing her hand to her forehead.

"What's wrong?" Scout asked her, worried.

"I remember more," Birdie said with hoarse, pained difficulty. "But it's like..." She grunted through gritted teeth. "It's like I have to pull them out of my head."

Scout felt Birdie's forehead, finding it hot and slick with sweat. Her eyes were closed but fluttering wildly, and her breath came in quick gasps.

"Hey, Birdie, it's okay!" Scout took her hand and squeezed it tight, feeling her rapid pulse through her palm. She feared this might be some kind of seizure. "Deep breaths, okay?"

Birdie forced herself to breathe deeper and slower, as Scout eased her to a safe sitting position. Her heartbeat gradually subsided and she opened her eyes, looking fatigued and deflated.

They sank into each other, neither moving for a long while as they recharged.

"The woman who had us store the painting," Birdie whispered, pausing for breath, "said it was for a research project."

Research. Scout had a relapse of that disquieting sense of recollection.

"Do you remember her name?" she asked her, suspicions escalating.

Birdie scrunched her eyes shut in concentration, but finally shook her head. "I don't remember. I'm sorry," she whispered.

They stood up slowly, Scout helping Birdie to her feet, and they approached the painting.

It was an ornate golden frame housing charcoal nothingness. Even the glass was practically invisible in its lack of reflectiveness.

Scout knelt down to touch the painting and yelped, her hand recoiling from the surface.

"It's hot," she announced, perplexed, as she rubbed her fingertips.

"I think I remember her name," Birdie croaked from behind her.

"Yeah?" Scout responded as she peered into the painting's inky depths.

"She said her name was..." Birdie swallowed dryly. "Rani."

"What?"

Scout whirled around to face Birdie, but saw her get shoved aside like a rag-doll by a frenzied Jonah.

Birdie struck her head on the edge of a table as she fell.

"Birdie!" Scout screamed.

Jonah advanced toward Scout. She considered making a run for it, sizing up her options, but she detected a mad strength in Jonah's spindly form.

She stood her ground, scowling, hoping she could remember the Doctor's aikido lessons.

Jonah pounced at Scout, but she darted to the side and delivered a hard right-hook to the back of his jaw. He moaned, dazed, and collapsed onto the painting, leaving a streak of blood on the glass as he sank to the floor.

Scout rubbed her stinging knuckles, then ran to check on Birdie.

She had a nasty bruise on her left temple and looked half-conscious, her eyes unfocused.

Scout crouched down to Birdie's level, her stomach knotted with worry. "Birdie! Are you all right? Say something!"

Birdie's eyes unglazed, and she gently took both of Scout's hands. She was her composed, indefatigable self again.

"My name is Gloria," she said softly.

Scout's breath caught.

Birdie looked to the left, sluggishly shifting her body in an attempt to look behind Scout. "Nice work," she remarked with a slight smirk, referring to the downed Jonah.

But suddenly, Scout felt a hand clamp around her ankle.

Her stomach sinking with icy dread, Scout twisted around to see Jonah holding onto her leg with a vice-like grip. His face was a

grimace of savage determination, and had an unsightly welt growing on his bloodied forehead.

She kicked at his face, but he only grunted with annoyance as he quickly tapped a bunch of buttons on a device mounted to his wrist.

“No!” Scout shouted.

She felt an all-body prickle as she and Jonah dematerialized together with a zap, leaving only a fizz of dispersing blue particles.

VI

Scout and Jonah rematerialized in a large room with stone walls and a black-and-white tiled floor.

They emerged a few inches above the floor. With no time to react, Scout fell in a sprawled heap, gasping as the impact forced the wind out of her lungs.

Jonah landed more nimbly, and immediately began restraining Scout with his long, wiry arms.

"Hey! Let me go!" Scout shouted, struggling furiously.

"That's enough, Jonathon. She isn't a threat," a high-pitched, caustic voice ordered.

Jonah sullenly released Scout and stepped back, though his eyes still emanated naked hostility.

Scout glared back, then searched for the source of the voice.

The room was pervaded with a low electronic hum, and there was a squat terminal in the middle. There were two reclining medical chairs with leather restraints, and two emitters of some kind perched overhead. The terminal was covered in buttons, levers and tiny screens, and a transparent cylinder housed dancing geometric shapes that slowly rose and fell.

This is a TARDIS, Scout realized.

The Rani's TARDIS. It had to be.

"Welcome, Scarlett," the voice greeted her from behind. "It's not altogether much, but make yourself at home."

Scout turned around to face the Rani.

This Rani was tall and fit, and had curly, puffy brown hair that lightened into blonde toward the ends. She had a regal countenance accentuated by her pronounced cheekbones and strong, aristocratic nose. She regarded Scout with keen scrutiny.

"Where am I?" Scout asked her guardedly.

"We're in the core of Xarallis Prime," the Rani informed her mildly.

"What?" Scout looked at the undulating console, then her eyes darted nervously around the room. "How is that possible? Star cores destroy TARDISEs, don't they?"

"Not when they're coated in twenty feet of dwarf star alloy," the Rani countered with a hint of smugness.

Scout exhaled slowly, expiring pent-up tension. "That was a stasis cube, wasn't it?" she determined soberly, recalling the inexplicably warm painting in the attic.

"Yes, very good," the Rani affirmed, pleased with her handiwork. "I had a younger self store the cube, and myself inside it, when I found out that the Healy residence would be hosting someone of your remarkable condition."

"What condition?" Scout sternly asked the Rani, eliciting a low growl from Jonah.

"You, Scarlett, are an invaluable asset to my experiments," the Rani answered with evasive pride as she approached the console.

Scout's fists clenched angrily.

Jonah remained on-guard, a figure of insensate obedience, but he swayed on his feet and squinted as blood dripped into his eye from the sodden gash at his hairline.

"What do you mean, 'experiments'?" Scout demanded.

"You, Scarlett, are uniquely suited to processing artron energy," the Rani declared as she began tapping commands into the console. "You are one of very few organisms in existence to have received direct exposure to the Time Vortex and lived."

Scout shrugged, recalling her ordeal at the orphanage.

"What's your point?" she uttered severely.

The Rani flicked a final lever and addressed Scout squarely. "I want what you've got," she said casually.

Scout released a sputtery half-laugh. "What do you mean?"

"As much as your Doctor's repeated close calls would suggest otherwise," the Rani remarked with slight resentment, "even Time Lords can't live forever. But your physiology brings you damn close," she observed with controlled admiration.

Now Scout actually laughed, but stopped herself after a few guffaws. "What are you talking about?" she remarked dismissively.

"Exposure to the Time Vortex made your cells more attuned to artron energy," the Rani informed her patiently. "Artron energy is a form of time energy, and when you, Scout, travel through time, you absorb artron energy exceptionally well. In basic terms, you will exist – you will happen for longer," she clarified with growing excitement.

"Okay," Scout responded dubiously.

"So, what, you want to imprint my biology onto yours?" Scout queried.

The Rani nodded. "Essentially, yes," she affirmed, smiling.

Scout took a deep breath. Against her better judgment, she was growing intrigued. "How much longer am I going to live, do you think?"

The Rani performed a brief scan using her TARDIS console, which Scout registered as a bout of pins and needles throughout her entire body.

The Rani studied the results, which appeared to Scout as indecipherable whorls of Gallifreyan text.

"According to your artron levels, you should be around for another three hundred and four years," the Rani announced.

304 years.

Scout could scarcely get her head around that figure.

The thought of living so long – across nearly four whole centuries, if she were to resettle in 1909 – filled her with awed trepidation.

How could anything she did stand out and retain meaning in such a tremendous span of time? She would have to watch everyone she would ever care about grow old and die before her – everyone except the Doctor, and certain adversaries of his.

Would she become a relic, cursed to remain the same while everything around her evolved?

Scout felt woozy at these prospects. She buckled on her feet, and reached out to the console for support.

“Don't touch anything, please,” the Rani warned her firmly. “The console keeps time running inside the cube. Disrupt the field and we freeze.”

“Oh.” Scout backed away.

She studied the Rani again.

This Time Lord mad scientist's current form was a big departure from the coldly pragmatic or haughtily cruel incarnations she'd encountered or heard about before. This Rani had abducted her, and was crazy enough to be plotting immortality inside a suspended star core, but she was patient, outgoing, conversational – almost sane.

Scout glanced to her right.

Jonah was in a bad way. He was two-faced from the bleeding: bright red on one side, ghostly pale on the other. He teetered on the edge of unconsciousness.

“What did you do to him?” Scout asked the Rani.

“Weaker minds are easier to influence,” the Rani indicated briskly. “When my scanners detected your presence, it was

triflingly simple to burrow into young Jonathon's mind and have him procure you."

Scout frowned in disgust. "So he's just a tool. I am too, right?" she inferred angrily.

"Yes, but it's nothing personal," the Rani made clear.

Scout scoffed, then looked at Jonah again. His eyes were half-closed, a thin string of drool extending from his slack jaw.

"Why are we in a star core?" Scout asked the Rani.

"Artron particles," the Rani responded, typing a command into her console and calling up a diagram on one screen. The diagram depicted a large sphere with a T and an F at either of its poles.

"Artron particles are the force particles of time, and only exist in the first billion-billion-billion-billionth of a second after the Big Bang, or in the cores of supermassive stars. There's enough in this cube to keep me going for several million years," she explained with relish.

Scout nodded, processing the situation.

This was surreal. This wasn't a Rani who wanted to grow a time-manipulating brain or enslave a planet's population as fodder for dark experiments. This Rani was ostensibly reasonable; she was bonkers, but could Scout really begrudge her for her plan this time?

Scout crossed her arms. "So, you want to... to transfer my cells' affinity for artron energy onto yours. How the hell are you going to do that?" she asked sceptically.

The Rani beckoned to the right chair. "I've worked it out. Tweaked Chameleon Arch technology. Don't worry. Please have a seat."

Scout frowned. "I don't have a choice, do I?"

She heard a heavy thud as Jonah collapsed. His limbs were splayed in awkward angles, his mouth lamely drooping open.

Despite his deteriorated mind and acts of violence, Scout felt some slight pity for him.

The Rani stared at the fallen Jonah for a few moments, mildly disappointed. Her face then shifted into a smirk as she extracted a thin, silvery device not unlike a sonic screwdriver from her pocket.

Noting Scout's reserved interest, the Rani twiddled her screwdriver in her fingers. "It's modded, and I don't think you want to find out how. Please," she beckoned again, pointing her screwdriver at Scout.

Scout reluctantly sat down on the right chair and let herself be strapped in, the leather restraints digging into her wrists.

The Rani gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder, then laid herself down on the other chair. She didn't fasten herself in, as she needed her hands to manage the procedure.

The Rani pointed her screwdriver at her console. "Initiating transfer."

She pressed a button on her screwdriver, which prompted a beep from the console.

A red line slowly crawled down Scout's body from head to toe, and then the Rani's emitter crackled to life, firing a white beam into her cranium.

The Rani's frame twitched as she grimaced, triumph behind the teeth-clenching pain.

Was it merely Scout's imagination, or did the Rani's face also seem to change? No, she wasn't imagining it – the Rani's face was warping and shifting before her eyes, her nose and cheeks smoothing out and becoming rounder as her hair grew straighter and darker.

The beam shut off and the transformation ceased.

Scout's eyes widened, astonished.

It wasn't quite like looking into a mirror, but it was close.

The Rani's features were now an off-putting – though not unsightly – amalgamation of her former self and Scout's own face. The Rani almost looked like she could be Scout's cousin.

Scout finally roused herself from her bemused amazement to speak up. “When you said you'd be transferring my biology to you, you weren't kidding,” she remarked.

“Oh, it's just cosmetic mutations,” the Rani countered, unfazed.

She felt her new-ish face, noted the stronger cheekbones, waggled her tongue and flexed her jaw.

“Or, I hope so.” Looking momentarily worried, the Rani quickly brought two fingers to her neck, then exhaled in relief.

“Good. Calibrations all sound. The fundamentals are unaltered,” she affirmed to herself. Noting Scout's puzzlement, she clarified her findings. “Still have the two hearts. And...” She scanned her wrist with her screwdriver, then checked the read-out panel. “Rassilon Organelles. Regeneration mechanism's still intact,” she declared.

Scout cleared her throat. “What now?” she asked with soft trepidation.

“Now it's time for the artron particles,” the Rani answered, reconfiguring her screwdriver. “Once they decay in my body, my lifespan will be extended by about 4.5 million years,” she explained proudly.

She paused, thumb poised over her screwdriver's button, and addressed Scout. “I'm sorry, do you want any?” she asked her sweetly.

Scout shook her head vehemently. Three hundred and four years was more than enough for her; she couldn't bear an even longer extension of her lifespan.

The Rani struck a sly smile. "Tough! I'm feeling generous!" she exclaimed forcefully, pressing the button on her screwdriver to initiate the second procedure.

The emitters buzzed again, and Scout reflexively winced as a second, bluish beam shot into her and the Rani's heads.

Suddenly, everything went dark.

Scout felt a vertiginous pulling sensation, and was deposited unceremoniously by invisible forces in a dark room.

Falling hard for the second time that day, she slowly eased herself to a sitting position, rubbing her aching elbows.

Deeply worried and extremely cold, Scout waited for her eyes to adapt to her near-pitch-black surroundings.

The walls were rounded and drab, and there was once again an elevated, bumpy structure in the middle, with a transparent cylinder at the top.

Scout trembled, her breath misting. She brought her knees to her chattering chin, and wished she were wearing more than just pyjamas.

This had to be an archived TARDIS console room, Scout determined; perhaps a generic template.

"Rani?" Scout called out. "Rani? Where are you?"

Scout yelped in surprise as a flickering image coalesced before her.

The image was of a severe yet flamboyantly-dressed woman with her hands placed authoritatively on her hips.

"This is an automated message to be played in the event of a complication in the artron particle implantation procedure," the hologram recited sourly. "In the event that my future self foolishly attempts to implant a large quantity of artron particles with another

person present, the TARDIS has transferred said parties into quarantine to preserve existence.”

Scout shivered in grim incomprehension.

“As artron particles have only two states – happen and not happen – their decay could be fatal in living hosts,” the hologram continued. “The aforementioned parties will be kept in separate inactive TARDIS partitions to avoid a collapsing of the superposition waveform. Life support cannot be maintained, as that would constitute quantum observation.”

Superposition. States. Waveform. Quantum observation. Those terms resonated within Scout's frantic mind.

She remembered a tale about a poor cat in a box, as part of a barbaric experiment, who was both alive and dead until the dastardly scientist checked inside the box.

Scout felt utterly desolate.

She was alive and dead, isolated from the rest of the universe, trapped in a star core inside a painting.

And she was going to freeze to death.

The air was stale and the cold bit down to the bone. Scout felt like the air was crushing her, her legs dead weights.

Her energy ebbed away. She felt so drowsy. More than anything, she wanted to lay her head down and go to sleep.

Her heavy eyelids slowly closed.

But before frigid slumber could claim her, she heard a rhythmic mechanical groaning.

Scout's eyes snapped open.

In the dark old console room, a blue police box slowly materialized before her.

Scout unfolded her numb body and stood to meet the apparition, beaming with elation and relief, but with fear clamouring at the back of her mind.

From what the hologram said, Scout figured there was a chance she would no longer exist – cease to exist, disappear or meet some other existential fate.

The Doctor's TARDIS solidified with a final thump and the doors creaked open.

Scout held her breath, bracing herself.

The Doctor leaned out of the entrance, looking right at Scout, extending an arm toward her.

“Come on, Scout! Get in!” he urged her.

Overjoyed, Scout ran into the Doctor's arms, grateful for his warm embrace and – from her perspective – the toasty atmosphere of his console room.

“Oh Scout, thank goodness I found you! I thought I'd lost you!” the Doctor said tenderly.

“How did you find me?” Scout asked him, soaking up his body heat.

“A tip-off from your flat-mates,” the Doctor answered plainly with a smile. “I'm sure they'll be happy to see you're okay.”

He tilted his head to the left, where Scout saw Izzie, Debbie and Birdie watching her. Birdie had a bandage around her head, but had the same wise fire in her eyes as ever. All three of her friends looked radiantly relieved.

Debbie squealed with Joy at the sight of Scout, and they all ran up to her and hugged her tight. Scout's heart swelled with love and cathartic relief, and she began to cry.

Scout smiled to herself as Birdie whispered into Debbie's ear: “And you thought the Doctor wasn't real.”

Debbie snickered.

At that moment, a thought occurred to Scout.

She gently disengaged from the group-hug and addressed the Doctor. "We need to save the Rani too," she insisted.

Her flat-mate friends cast mildly puzzled looks at her.

The Doctor raised a dubious eyebrow.

Scout relayed her time with the renegade scientist to him. "She'll freeze to death if we don't get to her," Scout persisted, surprised at her determination to see the Rani survive.

The Doctor exhaled sharply. "You're right," he conceded.

He exited his TARDIS into the Rani's archived console room, ignoring the extreme cold.

He crouched to check under the console and turned a valve marked 'Emergency Activation'. The room hummed to life, the ceiling lights slowly illuminating a space that, for all its derelict, long-untouched status, was eerily spotless and devoid of dust.

The Doctor entered a set of commands, and a labyrinthine map appeared on the main screen. The intricate map was predominantly grey and empty, but there were three promising red blotches: these represented the Doctor and his blocky TARDIS, and another humanoid splotch in a faraway room.

Something clicked in Scout's head.

"Wait!" she screamed.

She braved the cold and ran up to the console, fumbling for the off-switch for the monitor.

"What's wrong?" the Doctor asked her.

"You just observed her," Scout said grimly.

The Doctor shook his head uncertainly.

"The artron particles in her just decayed," Scout informed him seriously, shivering again. "She might not exist anymore."

The Doctor's eyebrows rose. "Ah. The old Schrödinger's Cat problem," he remarked. "Still, let's go get her."

The duo returned to the Doctor's TARDIS, and Scout gathered some warm clothes from the wardrobe.

Scout was almost unrecognizable under several layers of wool and cotton, her head nestled in the furry collar of a dense winter coat, but now she felt like she could brave any frigid condition.

Scout left the wardrobe to find Birdie waiting for her.

"Hi Gloria," Scout said, filling with a warmth unrelated to her winter gear.

"Hi Scout," Birdie said with a loving smile.

They stood silent, basking in each other's simple company. But the moment was tinged with reticence, with neither willing to speak.

"I guess you'll be leaving after this," Birdie said eagerly, though she squinted back tears. "Adventuring with the Doctor again. Saving people. Traveling through time!"

"I..." Scout's answer caught in her throat.

Birdie walked up to Scout and wrapped her arms around her. "It's okay," she assured her. "It's okay."

"I really like you," Scout whispered.

"I love you too, Scout," Birdie responded tenderly.

Birdie felt Scout's form twitch ever so slightly, and she released her.

"I do really like you," Scout reaffirmed, her eyes welling up. "But it's..." She swallowed, and tried again. "I don't really know what I feel. It's just going to take some time, that's all."

Scout looked at her feet, feeling ashamed. She scrunched her eyes shut; she couldn't look at Birdie after what she'd just said to her.

Birdie walked up to her and gently took Scout's head in her hands, tilting it upward. Scout reopened her eyes, and Birdie gazed into them with a look of such tenderness and wise understanding.

"It's okay. I get it completely," she said softly. "You've got all the time in the universe." She grinned cheekily. "I'll be back in 1972 if you need me."

Scout laughed, wiping away her tears. She never felt more admiration for Birdie than in this moment.

"Go on," Birdie told Scout.

Emboldened, Scout nodded. She took a deep breath. "Okay," she said softly. Another heaving breath. "Okay," she said again, louder and more certain.

Birdie affectionately rumped Scout's hair. "Attagirl."

"Scout? Are you ready?" the Doctor called from below.

"Coming," Scout answered, and began descending the stairs.

She turned and cast a parting smile at Birdie, reluctant to leave her but grateful for her blessing.

Scout joined the Doctor, and they headed back out into the frigid network of the Rani's deactivated TARDIS.

"Make yourselves at home," the Doctor told Debbie and Izzy before heading out. "Just don't touch the console."

Debbie and Izzy nodded, amiable confusion on their faces.

The Doctor and Scout's footsteps echoed tinnily in the cold corridors. Every passage looked the same to Scout; she was sure they'd get lost, but the Doctor strode on with phenomenal focus, barely pausing to decide which left or right to take. At their rapid pace, Scout found herself sweating inside her winter clothing, even as the cold pinched at her face and ungloved hands.

"We're here," the Doctor announced bluntly as they emerged into another archived console room.

This was neither abstractly elaborate like the Rani's main console room, nor factory-standard blank like the room Scout had been sent to by the emergency protocols. Through the cold darkness, Scout noticed that this console room had a muted Victorian ambience, with luxurious leather chairs, austere black-and-white portraits adorning the walls and a bronze central column encrusted with gears.

The décor reminded Scout unpleasantly of an earlier version of the Rani who she'd clashed with at an uncomfortable dinner party.

The Doctor hardly needed to announce their arrival. A faint bluish crackling light in the corner broke the gloom of the console room.

The pair slowly approached the monochromatic light-show.

Scout gasped and brought her hand to her mouth.

The Rani was an indignant statue, her motionless, scowling form enveloped by a fizzing layer of blue energy.

"Rani?" Scout said questioningly.

"She looks a bit like you," the Doctor observed, bemused. "Weird."

Scout felt a peculiar note of pity toward the incapacitated Rani, and reached out her hand.

"Uh, Scout, better not –"

The moment Scout touched the Rani's blue field, she shrieked as an electric charge lanced through her arm.

"What is that?" Scout asked the Doctor insistently.

"It's an extreme Blinovich field," the Doctor explained. "She's set to 'Not Happen,' so the field prevents time progressing for her and the outside world interacting with her."

"Oh." Scout's stomach sank at the thought. "How long is she going to be like that?"

The Doctor scanned the frozen Rani.

"About 2.1 million years," he determined drolly.

Scout gulped.

She felt a further pang of sympathy for the Rani.

Scout's own extended lifespan was nothing compared to the Rani's current state. Entire species would evolve, proliferate and die out in the span of her purgatory.

A faint beam of hope pierced through Scout's overwhelmed weariness.

Scout would live, or continue to exist, for another couple of centuries – perhaps longer, she realized with a fresh stab of anxiety, after the Rani bombarded her with artron particles. But whatever length her unnaturally extended lifespan would have, it would be a minuscule fraction of the Rani's unwitting stasis.

And Scout wouldn't be frozen. She would be aware, active, alive, living.

The Doctor had to be over 2500 years old by now, and he was certainly coping well.

Suddenly, Scout's near-immortality was not so daunting anymore. It felt more substantive, far more manageable.

She exhaled, her tensed frame relaxing. She felt calmer, more centred, more confident; confident that what she did in the future would matter, that she would still matter and hold meaning in the face of such enormity.

Sensing her existential relief, the Doctor smiled warmly and gently squeezed her shoulder before turning to the console.

"Let's make her comfortable for when she wakes up," he said of the Rani.

He flicked a switch and the archived console room's lights turned on with a dull hum.

The Doctor and Scout both jumped in surprise as the pillar at the centre of the console shuddered to life. They stared at it, confused, as it rose and fell, the engines answering with a rhythmic groan.

"The Rani's TARDIS is launching," the Doctor observed, perplexed.

The Doctor hurriedly typed in a series of commands, but was rejected with a waspish beep from the console. "I can't stop it," he said, slightly worried.

"Where's it taking us?" Scout asked warily.

The Doctor searched the screens for the destination. His eyes bulged.

"What?"

"We're going to Gallifrey," he announced.

After a few moments, the Rani's TARDIS landed with a thunk, and the Doctor and Scout made the long trek back to the main console room.

They paused before the sliding double-doors of the primary console room, with Birdie, Debbie and Izzy watching from the entrance of the Doctor's TARDIS.

They could hear the soft patter of rain from beyond the doors.

The Doctor and Scout each grasped a door-handle. They looked at each other, and nodded resolutely.

They flung the doors outward.

They emerged into a dark, sodden mire. The rain was hardly soft: rather, it was a pelting monsoon, punctuated by ferocious blasts of thunder.

The rain fell hard and fast, drenching their clothes and stinging exposed skin. Scout drew her coat's hood over her head, and the Doctor raised his arm to shield his head.

The muddy ground slurped at their feet, exotic trees shivered under the atmospheric onslaught, and the pair could just make out a pyramidal structure a fair distance away.

"It's the Death Zone," the Doctor murmured.

Far from uncomfortable or afraid, he looked almost elated.

The Doctor cast his gaze upward, biting rain forgotten.

The night sky was full of (to Scout) unfamiliar constellations, of a far greater density than in Earth's sky.

"Stars!" the Doctor cried joyfully.

"What about them?" Scout said. Despite feeling an almost bone-deep cold once again, she couldn't help but smile at the Doctor's excitement.

"This is Gallifrey in home space! Before I sent it away!" the Doctor explained. "It's..."

He alternately sniffed and gulped, smelling and tasting the air, eyes closed as he concentrated. Scout smirked at how silly he looked, but knew that this was just his way of figuring out what time period they were in.

"It's..." The Doctor finally opened his eyes, his mouth hanging open. "It's Gallifrey, 2.1 million years in the past."

Scout frowned.

She and the Doctor stood silent in the deluge.

"She planned this," Scout realized gravely.

"What are you up to, Rani?" the Doctor wondered aloud.

VII

The Doctor had returned to his spot in the long queue to meet the new Lord President.

People weren't generally allowed to cut in and out, but the other people in the line made a reverent, slightly intimidated exception for him.

You also weren't really supposed to bring a plus-one either, but no-one protested as Scout waited expectantly at the Doctor's side – though some Gallifreyans frowned or whispered askance at this human who presumed to speak with the Lord Empress.

The Doctor noted the dozens of people ahead of him. "Sorry about the wait," he muttered.

But Scout didn't mind the wait or the scrutiny.

She scanned her surroundings with undisguised awe. The waiting corridor was resplendent, festooned with a seemingly endless red carpet, vibrant tapestries, glittering light fixtures and heroic bronze statues.

After an interminable wait, during which even the hallway's lustre began to decay in Scout's eyes, she and the Doctor were finally admitted into the throne room.

The vast throne room was comparatively Spartan, pervaded with sterile white and silver hues. A long table for deliberation bisected the room, and the Lord Empress, clad in silken red-and-gold robes and flanked by stolid guards and advisors, sat aloft on a sleek golden throne.

The Lord Empress regarded her latest visitors with keen gratitude mixed with a self-satisfied smugness.

"Doctor! And dear old Scout! So good of you to see me!" the Lord Empress exclaimed.

"You played a clever game, Rani," the Doctor remarked drolly.

"All subjects will address the Lord Empress by her proper title," a burly, staff-wielding guard instructed sternly.

Lord Empress Rani raised her hand. "Stand down, Carcharo. These are trusted associates. A degree of informality is permissible."

"Yes, Lord Empress," Carcharo the guard rumbled, though he continued to stare daggers at the Doctor.

"Rani. Er – Lord Empress," Scout corrected herself. "Was this your plan all along? Did you freeze yourself on purpose?"

"Well, it was somewhat of a crap-shoot," the Lord Empress conceded, "but I would have won either way. Good thing the waveform decayed like it did." A twinkle entered her eye, and she cast a knowing glance at the Doctor. "Once frozen, hiding in the Death Zone was the perfect way to wait out the Time War and fill the power vacuum you left," she explained haughtily. "Exiling the Lord President. Naughty boy." The Rani winked her approval.

The Doctor's mouth curved into a wry smile. "You're going to get bored."

"Excuse me?" The Lord Empress raised an eyebrow.

"No test subjects, no experiments – you're going to find leadership unbearably dull," the Doctor observed flatly.

The Lord Empress exhaled, then shrugged. "I think you may be right." She grinned craftily. "Science got me here after all. But before I pack it in, I'm going to make some changes around here."

The Doctor nodded curtly. He cleared his throat. "You know, I never formally renounced my presidency. I've got more legitimate claim to the 'throne' than you."

"Oh?" The Lord Empress pursed her lips, amused. The guards' glares intensified.

But the Doctor's response surprised both the Lord Empress and Scout. He bent to one knee and executed a theatrical bow.

"Do what you want," he told her mildly. "This should keep you out of trouble. You can't be any worse at it than I was."

"Well, I certainly don't shoot my subordinates," the Lord Empress responded.

The Doctor's face reddened sheepishly.

He stood up. "Well, good luck, I suppose," he said.

The Lord Empress smiled. "Thank you, Doctor." She addressed Scout, a tinge of sympathy in her eyes. "I could have been more upfront about my plans, but you know it's just not my style."

Scout smiled faintly. "It's all right," she said awkwardly in response to that almost-apology.

The Doctor turned and marched to the door, brushing away the attendants who offered to escort him out.

"Come on," he ushered Scout from over his shoulder.

Scout looked at the Lord Empress, formerly – no, still, the mad maverick Rani – one last time, studying the rounded, distinctive features that were still unnervingly tilted toward her own.

The regal off-mirror nodded approvingly in parting.

Scout smiled again, wider this time, then ran to catch up with the Doctor.

AFTERWORD

I love writing.

I try to concentrate on serious or profitable writing projects, such as my weekly film review column for the Mountain Views Mail newspaper, or *Trans-Sentient*, a self-published volume of cyberpunk short fiction that occupied more than a year of my time.

It's wise to focus on the activities that will either make you money or grow your name and 'brand'.

However, I also love *Doctor Who*, and it's still fun to write fan media productions like this from time to time.

This novella originally took the form of a four-part live-action screenplay, which Illusionist Productions creative director W.D. Stevens commissioned me to write over three years ago.

The serialized screenplay, entitled *Two Jacks*, saw Scout meet her somehow identical-looking future self while vacationing in 1973, only for both of them to be pulled into a scheme orchestrated by prominent Illusionist villain Dowin the Devious. The title, "Two Jacks", alludes to Captain Jack Harkness, and how secondary antagonist Phoenix wants to replicate the conditions of Jack's immortality.

I had a fantastic time writing the screenplay, but with Illusionist's multiple labour-intensive ongoing audio series, and with Stevens and former creative partner Tom Denham parting ways (due to long-term artistic and personal friction between them), it became increasingly apparent that *Two Jacks* would not be filmed.

I was quite sad to see my screenplay remain unrealised, but then I had an idea.

I had just released *Trans-Sentient* in February, and had already published a book of Doctor Who short fiction – *Pre-Meds: A Multi-Doctor Series* – two years earlier.

Why not adapt *Two Jacks* into a novella?

I planned, wrote and edited the novella, which I eventually named *Scout's Superposition*, over the course of about a month.

Very early on, *Scout's Superposition* deviated immensely from the source screenplay.

The protagonist, Scout (the Rob Lloyd Doctor's companion from *Illusionist's* audio range), the 1970s setting and the narrative's use of stasis cubes and stolen stars were all retained, but Scout's future self was omitted, and the Doctor had far more 'screen-time' in *Two Jacks*, with *Scout's Superposition* effectively being a Doctor-lite story.

Scout's 1973 flatmates are vastly expanded in *Scout's Superposition*. None of them had spoken names, and only one had any audible dialogue, in the original screenplay, appearing only in a comedic montage of Scout settling into the psychedelic '70s. In *Scout's Superposition*, Scout settling into the '70s is a significant portion of the plot, and these flatmate characters have defined personalities and roles within the narrative.

Two Jacks featured an interstellar enforcement agency called the Celestial Fertility Regulatory Commission, which monitors the formation and development of stars, authorizes star hydrogen mining and punishes any unauthorized stellar manipulation. Elite agent Westerlund hounds the Doctor for his assumed theft of a supernova, interviewing both him and Phoenix in Parts Two and Three (respectively), before being devoured by Dowin.

The climax of *Two Jacks* doesn't use Schrodinger's Cat to defeat the villain, but rather an application of the (fictional) Blinovich

Limitation Effect, a discharge of energy that occurs when two identical space-time entities meet. This phenomenon has popped up numerous times in the show. The novella's climax also factors in Rassilon's exile from Gallifrey in *Hell Bent*.

The biggest change in the adaptation of *Two Jacks* was the different villain.

I had really wanted to write an audio drama featuring Melbourne actress Suzy Markovski, who had previously played the Rani with graceful, distinguished malice in the Illusionist audio drama *La Cage aux Reine*. I even planned out a story involving Markovski's Rani attempting to disarm the Nemesis superweapon (from *Silver Nemesis*) by sacrificing the pacifistic Tivolians to it.

But Stevens informed me of how busy Markovski can be, and suggested that I create my own separate incarnation of the Rani. I happily did so, and when I began plotting out *Scout's Superposition*, I decided to make my Rani the antagonist.

Since *Scout's Superposition* is a literary release, the person portraying my Rani is fairly incidental, but I still wanted to cast someone who "fit the bill", as it were.

I invited friend, fellow author (writer of the young adult fantasy novel *Fyrebyrne Island*) and science teacher Ashleigh Oldfield to portray my version of the Rani – the Rani loves science and Ash teaches it, so you can see why I thought of her – but she politely declined.

I ultimately contacted comedian Alice R Fraser, after seeing her on ABC2 Doctor Who fan panel show *Whovians*, and she very kindly let me use her image for the novella's Rani.

The general gist of the plot, and the villain's goal of attaining immortality, remained the same from *Two Jacks* to *Scout's Superposition*, but with the back-story of a past incarnation of the

Rani (the Kate O'Mara version) stowing away a powerful artefact at the behest of her future self (Fraser). As such, *Scout's Superposition* became something akin to *Remembrance of the Daleks*, but for the Rani. This parallel developed with growing excitement on my part, as *Remembrance of the Daleks* is in my personal top ten of classic *Who* serials.

(It also just occurred to me that *Scout's Superposition* is essentially a multi-Rani story.)

Much of my depiction of the '70s is deliberately archetypal, encompassing gaudy fashion, disco, classic movies, Women's Lib and other defining elements of this bombastic decade.

At this point, I feel I must address an anachronism: in the disco segment, Scout and her friends are dancing to the song 'Automatic Man' by Automatic Man, from their debut album *Automatic Man*.

Automatic Man is a little-known and short-lived prog-rock band that disbanded shortly after the 1977 release of *Visions*, their second album. They've been largely forgotten in the intervening decades, but they deserve far more recognition for their exciting, ahead-of-its-time fusion of rock and electronic influences. With their synth-infused sound and earnestly poetic, often sci-fi-themed lyrics, Automatic Man almost feels like early Muse at times, but with a more Jimi Hendrix-like bassy intensity and love of over-the-top solos. The eponymous track, 'Automatic Man', is one of my favourite songs from the '70s, so I had to include it in *Scout's Superposition* – even though the album came out three years after the novella's time period.

Who knows – maybe the Rob Lloyd Doctor loves '70s prog-rock too, and slipped this album from the future to the DJ so that Scout could rock out to it during her vacation?

And after all, *Doctor Who* is, by its very nature, practically a celebration of anachronisms.

My good friend Sean Mills (who I had in mind to play Agent Westerlund in *Two Jacks*) gave me editorial advice on *Scout's Superposition*, and he's one of those Whovians who sometimes expresses passionate disapproval of certain *Doctor Who* elements that I myself don't really care about.

For instance, Sean objected to the Twelfth Doctor's initial disdain of soldiers, but this character trait didn't bother me. Regenerations reshape Time Lord personalities in dramatic ways, so I took it at face value that this incarnation would dislike soldiers.

Sean found the Rani becoming Lord Empress of Gallifrey somewhat out of character – **she's a mad scientist, not power-hungry!** – but I thought this portrayal of the Rani was fine, due both to the personality-changing effects of regeneration and the broader context of Gallifrey.

The Doctor has never had a desire to rule, having quickly given up his Lord President title several times. The Master has unsuccessfully tried to conquer Gallifrey at least twice – with his hearts generally set on conquering Earth – and Rassilon is now a powerless outcast.

In light of all that, it seems reasonable to me that the Rani might want to take a crack at ruling Gallifrey, wielding her beloved science as a tool with which to seize control.

I had a fun time writing *Scout's Superposition* (and this expository follow-up), and I hope you enjoyed reading it.

Cheers.

Seth Lukas Hynes

June 2017

ADDENDUM

I also like to think of this novella as my own personal conclusion to Series 9 (2015). With the Rani effectively becoming a hybrid and going on to rule Gallifrey, *Scout's Superposition* offers a more concrete and satisfying resolution to the ominous Hybrid prophecy than Series 9's hand-wavey non-conclusion.

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Front and back cover photos taken by **Patrick Slee**.

Cover designs by **Seth Lukas Hynes**.

Photo of **Kate O'Mara** (the first Rani) taken by the **BBC**.

Photo of **Siobhan Redmond** (the second Rani) taken by **Big Finish**.

Photo of **Suzy Markovski** (the third Rani) taken by **Patrick Slee**.

Photo of **Alice R Fraser** (the fourth Rani, pre-conversion) taken by **Chris Lew**. Photo used with permission.

Photo of **Sarah Dalton** (the fourth Rani, post-conversion) taken by **Jess Van Straalen**. Photo used with permission.

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Birdie 'selfie' originated as a selfie taken by **Polly Maeve Fletcher**.

Photo used with permission.

Lastly, thank you once again to the fine storytellers of the BBC.



Here's Gloria 'Birdie' Healy taking a selfie with Scout's cell-phone, a device which is arguably just as anachronistic to Scout herself.

THE RANI'S REGENERATIONS

A member of the elite clique The Deca in the Time Lord Academy on Gallifrey (along with the Doctor and The Master), the Rani is a cold scientific genius with a keen interest in unethical experimentation.



THE FIRST RANI

Portrayed by Kate O'Mara

The first known incarnation of the Rani had a haughty, theatrical manner, reflected in her grandiose schemes. She formed a begrudging alliance with the Master in a joint effort to conquer Earth from her base in the 1820s English village of Killingworth. Later, she enslaved both the Lakertyans and the Tetraps and enslaved famous geniuses from throughout human history, with the intent of creating a time manipulator with which she could reshape the universe.



THE SECOND RANI

Portrayed by Siobhan Redmond

The second known incarnation of the Rani had a subtler, more Scottish persona. She posed as Professor Baxton at the College of Advanced Galactic Education (CAGE) and used a Sidereal Brain Scanner to manipulate students' minds, and served 97 years at Teccaurora Penitentiary for trying to create a race of gods on the planet Miasimia Gora.



THE THIRD RANI

Portrayed by Suzy Markovski

The third incarnation of the Rani was more workman-like, conducting extensive studies on a synthetic growth hormone as a means to increase the food supply for a manual labour race. After finding success in her tests on an insectoid species, she attended a Victorian dinner party undercover and laced the food and drink with the hormone, seeking to observe its effects on humanoid subjects.



THE FOURTH RANI

*Portrayed by Alice R Fraser
and Sarah Dalton*

A more amiable and outgoing incarnation than her predecessors, this Rani was also more reckless, given her willingness to experiment on herself. Through a strange twist of self-executed fate, this Rani became Lord Empress of Gallifrey after Rassilon's exile, and ruled for several centuries on a platform of scientific proliferation, territorial expansion and regulated temporal interventionism, before mysteriously vanishing. She is also one of few Time Lords to have changed her appearance through means other than regeneration.

SCOUT'S SUPERPOSITION



THE DOCTOR
ROB LLOYD

SCOUT
MORGAN THOMAS-CONNOR

THE A SIDE

SCOUT VACATIONS IN THE 1970s,
MEETING NEW FRIENDS AND
EXPERIENCING ALL THE
SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF
THIS DAZZLING, GROOVY
NEW TIME PERIOD

THE OTHER SIDE

SCOUT FINDS HERSELF
ENTANGLED IN A
MAD PLAN INVOLVING
QUANTUM MECHANICS
AND AN OLD ADVERSARY
OF THE DOCTOR

WRITTEN BY
SETH LUKAS HYNES

PRODUCED BY
ILLUSIONIST PRODUCTIONS

COVER PHOTOS BY
VARIOUS ARTISTS

BACK COVER PHOTO BY
W.D. STEVENS

